

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
St. Peter Indian School Mission,
1500 North St. Peter Road, Bapchule, Arizona 85221
Friday – May 12, 2006

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m. by Chairman Ellis.

Members Present

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson
Tom Dingwall, Acting Vice Chair
Joe Bibich
Robert Boyd
Linda Fulkerson
Phillip Quochytewa
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner
Lee Borgen, Veterans Benefits Counselor
Lance Sheldon, ADVS Information Technology

Opening Ceremonies and Welcome

Commissioner Quochytewa gave the opening prayer in Hopi. The Commissioners introduced themselves and Chairman Ellis asked that the attendees do the same. The Field House was decorated and refreshments were set out by Sister Martha and four other Sisters. Our host for the evening was Flores Michael Kyiitan on behalf of the St. Peter Indian School. Chairman Ellis expressed his sincere appreciation for their hospitality.

Briefing on Issues of Importance to Native American Veterans

General opening comments:

- Commissioner Quochytewa encouraged Arizona tribes to get involved with all levels of government. He said that tribes frequently confuse state, county, municipal, and federal benefits; but they need to be better connected to these entities. Tribes in the 3-county region were invited to attend the meeting tonight and he encouraged the attendees to ask questions.
- Governor Janet Napolitano has been a staunch supporter of veterans issues. She has consistently sought information from the veteran community. Additionally, Governor Napolitano has requested that each agency develop policies that state how they will coordinate with tribes. A copy of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services policy was provided this evening.

Communication:

- Father Meulemans said that this is a very patriotic community, and he suggested that the Post develop a means to communicate more effectively. He was not aware of this meeting, for example, and felt that the Posts on the reservation could help to advertise events of interest to veterans.
- There are about 5 veterans service organizations on the Gila River Indian Community reservation. There are several community centers and various counselors on the reservation available to support veterans.

- Dave Anderson thanked the Commission for holding this meeting. He said that the meeting was ill-attended because it was not publicized in the ways that the residents were aware of the meeting.
 - The best way to advertise an event or a meeting is by stapling flyers to various bulletin boards on the reservation. Local veterans service organizations know where these posting should be and can help post future events.
- Mike Clemenson believed that the Non Commissioned Officers Association and Air Force Sergeants Association do not receive any communications from the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services. Dave Anderson said he believes that the Special Forces Association may also be excluded.
 - Chairman Ellis offered to personally research how communications come from the Department to ensure these organizations are not excluded.
- How to obtain information from various tribes regarding veteran issues:
 - Work with the elders from tribes, as they are very respected and have the best access to information from tribal members.
 - Non-Indians providing technical details can sound like representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This perception immediately restricts their ability to obtain information from tribal members. Even the volume of a person's voice can limit the flow of information and affect the trust factor from a tribal member.
 - Veterans benefits counselors must sit and spend the time with individual veterans, never pushing the veteran to provide information. The veterans on the reservation will only feel comfortable opening up when they move at their own pace.
- Understanding legal issues or technical federal regulations may be overwhelming to American Indians. When bureaucrats are trying to share specific details of obtaining a benefit, it is frequently perceived that they are not being helpful.
- American Indians are intimidated by excessive paperwork and cumbersome processes. They want to be told in a simple, helpful way how to lay claim to their benefits.

Arizona offers very few state benefits to its veterans:

- The few state benefits provided are listed on the agency website as www.azdvs.gov, but it would be helpful to send the printed information to the veterans service organizations on the reservations.
- There is property tax relief for 100% disabled veterans from the individual counties, but the amount of paperwork required discourages many veterans from applying.
- Commissioner Yamanouchi answered the question posed about how Arizona compares with other state benefits. At \$.32 per month per veteran, Arizona is significantly behind other states (with an average of spending \$.80 per veteran per month). Even if all of the proposed budget items pass this year, Arizona is still behind many states in the benefits that it provides its veterans.

Legislation:

- Noel Benoist requested support for a bill that was initiated by the National American Indian Veterans (NAIV), an organization of American Indian veterans. Their goal is to have a minimum of two tribal representatives to serve as service officers for every tribe in the country. He provided a list of recommendations for American Indian veterans to Chairman Ellis.
- Chairman Ellis explained that the Commission cannot influence the federal legislature as much as we can make changes locally, but they have prepared letters to recommend changes by federal lawmakers.

- Chairman Ellis encouraged the attendees to work through their veterans service organizations to get their local and national organization lobbyists to write letters to lawmakers.
- Commissioner Boyd suggested that phone calls also make a tremendous difference.
- NAIV has initiated legislation to clear the way for VA State Cemetery Grant Services to build cemeteries on tribal land.
- There needs to be a streamlined way to change the status of dishonorably discharged Code Talkers.
 - Many Code Talkers were told to wait until they received papers that discharged them before returning home. Because of language difficulties, many of them received letters from the Department of Defense they believed were discharge orders. When they returned home believing that all paperwork had been completed, they were dishonorably discharged.

Funding:

- Non-tribal governments receive an estimated 12% of the casino profits from tribes. Gaming tribes would be supportive of veterans programs and the Commission should solicit those funds to benefit the veterans of Arizona.
 - John Antone is a Council member who can help identify means of accessing these types of gaming funds.
 - Commissioner Fulkerson said that there was an attempt to request funds from a tribal government to fund a veterans program in the past, but it has not yet been successful.
- The VA brought in tribal service officers for training twice a year and accessed federal grant monies. There may still be an opportunity for federal funding to train Native counselors.
- Julius Anguiano, Veterans Affairs Coordinator for the Tohono O'odham Nation, said that Roger Begay came down to Tucson to provide no-cost training for one week to his 15 Native counselors. The training took place several years ago.
 - The Tohono O'odham Nation now has a single veterans benefits counselor.

VA Home Loans

- Native Americans have unique obstacles obtaining a home loan on the reservation, because the land is owned by the tribe and not by the individual.
 - There is a home loan program for reservation residents, but the VA is looking to eliminate the program because it is not being used.
 - Mike Clemenson offered to get information into Chairman Ellis's hands regarding the new program.
- Julius Anguiano said that he has been struggling to coordinate the Home Loan program with the Tohono O'odham Nation. He built a home off the reservation himself because the program was so cumbersome, and is very aware of the limitations of the program (such as the \$80,000 cap). There is a need for a Memo of Understanding (MOU) between the tribe and the US Department of Veterans Affairs.
 - Commissioner Quochytewa said that there has been at least one MOU developed, and held up a copy from his briefcase.
 - The MOU has only been used once, but it does establish an important precedent. He offered his card to Mr. Anguiano so they could discuss the MOU further outside the meeting.
- Noel Benoist spoke about Bank Two – a tribal bank specifically geared for home loans on reservations. He offered his assistance to those in attendance (phone number 480.430.2878 and his email is theoriginalphantom007@hotmail.com).

Trust is key to successfully provide counseling to veterans on the reservation.

- There are a significant number of veterans' widows who are hesitant to speak with non-Native American counselors.
 - Spouses may be even more hesitant to work with counselors who are seen as "outsiders." A tribal member would be much more successful in obtaining information to file claims.
 - Veterans benefit information should be published in local newsletters and made available through other communications on the reservation.
 - An attendee suggested that a Public Service Announcement be developed to put on reservation radio stations to inform spouses of benefits that are due to them.
 - Gold Star Wives and Mothers may be able to assist veterans who are recently widowed.
- Having a veterans benefits counselor from Indian Country is tremendously helpful to a tribal member.
 - It is important that the VA train individuals from the community to provide claims administration for veterans on the reservation.
 - Native American service officers can allow the veterans to describe their situations in their own languages and work with a member of their own tribe (or a closely aligned tribe).
 - There is occasionally inter-tribal friction that may also affect communications.

Health care

- Perhaps the Advisory Commission could encourage the VA to open a serious dialog with the Indian Hospital.
- The average life expectancy for a Native American male is about 47 years old.
- Veterans are being denied access to the Indian Hospital because of their veteran status and they are frequently unable to access VA medical care.
 - There is some speculation that the life expectancy may be connected to this issue.
- One suggestion was made to place an American Indian sweat lodge alongside the state veteran homes now in existence and the ones being planned. They have done this in Las Vegas and it would help accommodate American Indian customs.

Transportation:

- They have to get up early in the morning to hitchhike to see a veterans benefits counselor or to get to a VA facility.
- Sitting in an office is more difficult for the American Indian veteran than having services available in their own homes.

Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 9:01 p.m. The next regular meeting will be held at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, May 13, 2006, in Casa Grande, Arizona and attendees were invited to attend.